

# MANAGING REMOTE PRESENTEEISM

**AAB** **PEOPLE**

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Pre-pandemic, nobody could have imagined the dramatic changes to the workplace that were about to take place. It almost seems unbelievable how much the phrase “a normal day at the office” has come to mean something completely different. Many organisations moved to remote working so that operations can continue despite the coronavirus, but this has remained in place. Organisations across the country have faced challenges that were previously unforeseeable and have undertaken adaptations in a matter of days which, in normal times, would usually have taken years. Despite seeing the end of lockdowns and restrictions, most organisations will not fully return to their pre-COVID operations, with flexible and remote working becoming part of their new normal.

Homeworking has many advantages, such as: reduced fatigue from commute; more flexibility over child care; and maybe even an extra half hour in bed each morning. However, there are some downsides which may be having an unforeseen impact on your employees and their productivity.

In this latest briefing note we will examine how sickness differs for home workers, the impact this has on your organisation and the practical steps you can take to ensure your employees are supported and continue to thrive.

## Sickness and homeworking

In ‘normal’ times, if an employee was feeling unwell, they would call in and notify you that they weren’t fit to work. The absence management procedures would kick in and you would be able to support the employee until they were fit to return to work.

The entire absences management process is reliant on one key step; the employee admitting they’re sick and in need of time to recover. Research has shown that those with the option of homeworking are less likely to take sick leave than if they’re working in the office.

“Great!” you might be thinking. This means less time spent on absence management and employees who are working every day.

Unfortunately, things may not be quite as simple as they seem.

## Impact on your Organisation

Sickness Presenteeism is something you may have heard of before. As a quick reminder this term refers to employees who come to work despite being unfit to do so due to sickness. In a workplace setting, this can be disastrous, especially if the employee’s sickness is due to an infection such as the common cold, flu or norovirus as other employees can end up feeling unwell and before you know it, ten people are taking time off rather than one.

This is an obvious downside to presenteeism. With homeworkers the issue of infection transfer doesn’t exist (hence its encouragement during a global pandemic), however, further issues relating to presenteeism do come into play.

Productivity reduces when an employee is sick yet continues to work. Some studies have shown this drop off to be as great as 50%, whilst the quality of that work is vastly reduced when compared to normal standards. Rather than looking at statistics, think about a time you’ve worked when you didn’t feel 100% (I guarantee everyone reading this has). Perhaps you didn’t feel sick enough to take time off, but the quality and productivity of your work will not have been to its usual standard.

## GET IN TOUCH

If you have any questions, or would like further support, please get in touch with Georgia Wilson by calling 0141 221 2984 or by email at [georgia.wilson@aab.uk](mailto:georgia.wilson@aab.uk).

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Some of you may be thinking, “I’d rather someone give me 50% than nothing at all” and whilst there is logic to this thinking, the rationale doesn’t really hold up. When calculating resource budgets for the year, staffing levels should be factoring in sickness absences and smart planning would have you take into consideration unplanned leave. A drop in productivity due to absence is easy to justify. However, it’s far more difficult to explain why there was a dip in productivity when all staff were present.

Presenteeism also lengthens recovery time. Rather than taking the dedicated time to rest and recover, the body is having to try and function as normal whilst also fighting off an infection. If you google how to reduce illness recovery, none of the search results suggest that working as normal will improve your recovery. So rather than someone being off for a few days, they are still logging on but their performance is 50% lower than usual for the whole week.

Ultimately it is better for both your organisation and your employees for them to take the time needed to recover.

As more employees are working at home than ever before, this has become a big problem. So what can you do to address this?

## 5 key steps for managing remote presenteeism

Having examined the problems caused by presenteeism let’s now take a look at the practical steps you can take to minimise the impact.

### Step 1 – Vigilance

You probably aren’t interacting with employees as much as you would have been in the office and certainly won’t be in as close contact. All of this makes it difficult to tell when someone is sick, so it’s important to be extra vigilant. This can be as little as someone saying during a call that they aren’t feeling great, or a reliable person not completing a task as expected. There are many different things that could indicate someone isn’t at their best. Once you’ve identified that something isn’t quite right, have a conversation with the person. Find out if anything is amiss, if they are feeling unwell then remind them that remote workers still get sick. The absence management process is there to support employees who aren’t fit enough to work.

### Step 2 – Mental Health Awareness

It’s important to bear in mind that there are different types of sickness. This may seem obvious but it’s far easier to tell that someone has a blocked nose than if they’re mood is low. Isolation can have a big impact on a person’s wellbeing, as can anxiety brought on by working without having a supportive team around you. Just like physical illnesses, those who have a mental illness often need time to rest and recover. The best thing you can do is to have a conversation with them and work out what’s best for them. They may need to take some time off or having more regular team calls might help things. The only way to find out is to speak with them and let them know that you are there to support them.

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## Step 3 – Policy still applies.

Whether this is by email, the staff intranet or even over a video call, let your employees know that the absence management policy still applies when working remotely. Remind Employees that they should still take time off work if they aren't fit due to sickness. Just like the sickness absences policy when you were in the office, this shouldn't be taken advantage of and should only be used by those who are genuinely sick. When an employee isn't feeling 100% they should ask themselves "would I go into the office?" and if the answer is no then they shouldn't be switching on the laptop.

## Step 4 – Check in Regularly

Now more than ever it's important to check in with your employees and see how they're getting on. Not purely from a work perspective, but from a human one. Are they coping with being at home, are they getting enough exercise, do they still talk to other people? We're aware of the impact mental wellbeing has on people now more than ever. Ensuring employees' mental wellbeing is supported is the responsibility of their manager and as such, you should try to dedicate time each week to contact individuals about their wellbeing. This shouldn't be a tick box exercise, instead call them for a catch up, ask them about their life and see if they're doing okay.

## Step 5 – Reasons for presenteeism

You may have done all of the above and notice that one of your employees continues to sign in every day despite not being well. If this is the case it may be worth looking at why this is happening. Presenteeism can often be caused by the demands of work outweighing the need to rest. If an individual has a high workload or a lot of tight deadlines they are less likely to take time off when needed. Another indicator of workload being a factor is someone not taking many holidays. In this scenario, you as the employer have a responsibility to support the employee and address the work imbalances or any stresses being caused by work. If you're not sure then the best thing to do is to talk to the employee.

## Conclusion

The world of work has gone through a lot of changes over the last year and it's unlikely to return exactly to what life was like previously. With more remote working it's essential to be aware of presenteeism and be able to identify signs of this in your organisation. Open communication with staff as a whole and on an individual level is the most important way of tackling this all too common "workplace" issue.

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